

New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1948

Volume IX, Number 5

Rachel W. Coffin, Editor

Week of February 23, 1948

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NEW YORK DAILY NEWS NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK MIRROR NEW YORK NEWSPAPER PM
NEW YORK SUN NEW YORK POST NEW YORK TIMES

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"Tonight at 8:30"

Journal **and** American

February 21, 1948

Gert Lawrence In Fine Fettle

By ROBERT GARLAND

Specialists in chronometry will be interested in "Tonight at 8:30" which, scheduled to get going at 8:40 last night at the National, actually got under way at a quarter to nine. It was worth waiting for, I guess, with Gertrude Lawrence, star of the Noel Coward vaudeilles, in fine get-Gertie fettle.

Time and times do change. In a dozen years, "Tonight at 8:30" has changed to "Tonight at 8:45," the sketches have changed from nine to six, the opening group has changed so that it includes only "Red Peppers" of the original three, and Noel Coward, as Miss Lawrence's co-worker, has changed to Graham Payn.

Gertrude Lawrence has scarcely changed at all. "Susan and God," "Skylark," "Lady in the Dark" and "Pygmalion" have come and gone, leaving her practically intact. Even the

ENSA, the ATW and the Gertrude Lawrence Personal Parcel Service, bundling like beavers for Britain, have been down on her lightly . . .

Would that I could say the same about the war-ridden years and Mr. Coward's oh-so-English little pieces. . . .

Three One-Act Plays

Last night's one-acters included "Ways and Means," a "light comedy," "Family Album," a "Victorian comedy with music" and "Red Peppers," an "interlude with music" and the one holdover from the original first three, "Hands Across the Sea." "Fumed Oak" and "Shadow Play" arrive on Monday.

"Ways and Means," brought down to date with context somewhat altered, is, with its Oscar Wilde-ian bouquet, the best preserved and most amusing of the opening three. In it, Graham Payn, pinch-hitting for Noel Coward, is not called upon to sing. This, in itself, isn't unhelpful to the Mayfair little offering.

"Family Album," which follows after an intermission, is interesting as an opportunity for the on-stage Englishers to try their Shaftesbury Avenue accent on the word "squirrel." "Red Peppers," which follows after another intermission, is interesting as an opportunity

for Miss Lawrence to have herself a time.

This she does brilliantly, cutting-up and carrying-on as if the year were 1936 and her helper were that dear Noel.

Bad Audience

Having obviously borrowed John C. Wilson's "first-night list," Homer Curran, Russell Lewis and Howard Young, reproducers of "Tonight at 8:30," provided an elegant Mayfair-on-Manhattan audience which with its bad taste, bad timing and bad manners, could spoil a better New York opening than last night's at the National.

But, above and around the seat-changing, the yoo-hoo-ing and oh-my-dearing, I was able to discover that Miss Lawrence was in great get-Gertie fettle, that Philip Tonge was a godsend to all three one-acters, that Valerie Cosart wasn't bad in the first two, and that, worse luck, a Payn isn't necessarily a Coward.

The settings by George Jenkins are adequate, except for one nineteenth century drawing-room in "Family Album," which is Betonian in its chichi. The music, composed by Mr. Coward, sounds as if it had been written by someone with a sweet tooth, as one of the characters remarks. And the evening's star is always Gertrude Lawrence . . .

"TONIGHT AT 8:30"

Three short plays by Noel Coward; settings by George Jenkins; dances by Richard Barlow; musical direction Frank Tours; staged by Noel Coward; presented by Homer Curran, Russell Lewis and Howard Young at the National Theatre Friday evening, February 20, 1948. The cast:

"Ways and Means"

Stella Cartwright—Gertrude Lawrence
Toby Cartwright—Graham Payn
Gaston—Booth Colman
Lord Chapworth (Chaps)—William Roerick
Olive Lloyd-Ransome—Sarah Burton
Princess Mena Krasloff—Valerie Cosart
Murdock—Philip Tonge
Nanny—Norah Howard
Bavens—Rhoderick Walker

"Family Album"

Jasper Featherways—Graham Payn
Jane—Gertrude Lawrence
Lavinia—Sarah Burton
Hastings—Norah Howard
Emily—Valerie Cosart
Richard—William Roerick
Charles Winter—Rhoderick Walker
Edward Valance—Booth Colman
Gurrows—Philip Tonge

"Red Peppers"

Lily Pepper—Gertrude Lawrence
George Pepper—Booth Colman
Aunt—Rhoderick Walker
Bert Bentley—Norah Howard
Mabel Grace—Philip Tonge

Last night, when I left the National, Noel Coward was taking bows without a single "Boo!" from Brooklyn to dampen the English-American lovefest.

DAILY NEWS

February 21, 1948

Gertrude Lawrence Cuts Capers In a Revival of 'Tonight at 8:30'

By JOHN CHAPMAN

I have never actually seen a barrel of monkeys, but last evening I did see Gertrude Lawrence in Noel Coward's "Red Peppers" sketch at the National Theatre and am positive that she is more fun than.

A little like them, too, I guess. Anyway, she is uninhibited; with the greatest good humor and the most profound unconcern about what the neighbors may think she romps through this playlet about a tank-town vaudeville duo and makes one glad she is alive and kicking. She is having a good time, and when Miss Lawrence has a good time everybody else does.

"Red Peppers" is the last of the three short turns which make up the first section of "Tonight at

8:30." Three more will be presented Monday evening, and thereafter the two bills will divide up the weeks which may ensue.

Same Audience, Only Older.

It was quite an evening about 12 years ago when "Tonight at 8:30" made its debut at the National with Mr. Coward and Miss Lawrence as the stars—chichi as all hell. Last evening some of the same mob of first-nighters was on hand, still trying bravely to be chichi as

all hell. They looked older and more leathery, but they had preserved their manners from the old days.

They lit matches and smoked in the aisles and in the rear of the theatre, haughtily ignoring the feeble bleats of ushers who kept trying to tell these jerks that one doesn't do that sort of thing, particularly in a sardine box like the National. I tried to find the fireman assigned to the house, to suggest that maybe now would be a good time to make a pinch and haul some well-dressed slob, preferably female, right out of the theatre and up to night court. But he wasn't around. Maybe he was

backstage getting an autograph from Miss Lawrence.

Very Light Comedy.

Well, as I was saying before the subject of firebugs came up, it was quite an evening a dozen years ago. And it isn't too bad, now. The first of the sketches, "Ways and Means," remains a fluffy enough piece about a couple who are dead broke but still putting on the dog on the Riviera. The second item, "Family Album," is a little Victorian comedy with some little Noel Coward songs. Charming enough, I guess, but it won't drive you crazy.

Miss Lawrence's partner this time is not Mr. Coward, but Graham Payn, and Mr. Payn does very well in a tough spot. He is particularly good in "Red Peppers," which still is a superb burlesque of a third-rate vaudeville team devoted to songs, dances and funny sayings. Among the others of the company I liked best Philip Tonge for his portrayal of an ancient manservant in "Family Album."

But my gal is Gertrude Lawrence. I'll buy the house fireman a nice new summons book and a cop's nightstick if he'll get me her autograph.

The Sun

February 21, 1948

By WARD MOREHOUSE.

Miss Lawrence's Evening.

Noel Coward's short plays seem to have lost some of their jauntiness, and they fairly shriek for the presence of the master, but Gertrude Lawrence, as captivating as

ever, carries on bravely and the first batch of sketches in the "Tonight at 8:30" series, submitted last evening at the National, provides an engaging bill. The second group will be given Monday.



It's been a dozen years since these deftly written short plays, crowded with wit, insult, impudence and delightful malice, were first presented in New York, and they're now not quite as sparkling as they were in 1936, but Miss Lawrence is changeless and unchanging. She is in fine form in "Ways and Means," she is lovely to look upon in "Family Album," and in "Red Peppers," the best of the lot, her characterization of the snappish Lily Pepper, knockabout vaudeville singer and hooper, is quite wonderful.

In "Ways and Means," which opens the program, Miss Lawrence and Graham Payn appear as house guests at a Riviera villa, embarrassed by a shortage of funds. Toby Cartwright lost at

roulette and they haven't even the money to tip the servants upon their departure. But when

a burglar enters their room via a window the Cartwrights put him to work for them, sending him down the hall to rob a woman from New Jersey who has 170,000 francs. "Ways and Means," the weakest of the first group of plays, got the evening off to an uncertain start last night, but the bill improved immeasurably as it went along.

"Family Album" is the Victorian comedy with music which begins solemnly in the drawing room of the Featherways' house in Kent in the autumn of 1860, following the reading of the will of the head of the clan. The gloom gradually vanishes as two decanters of fine old Madeira are consumed and it's Lavinia Featherway who startles everybody with the revelation that they all would not be so well off were it not for the fact that the most recent Featherway will, in which the old gentleman left everything to some women friends, had been destroyed by her with the butler's assistance. The evening ends gayly.

The entertaining "Red Peppers," which closes the bill, is a recital of the woes of the rowdy Peppers, Lily and George, during an engagement at the Palace of Varieties in one of the smaller

English provincial towns. Lily Pepper is a Cockney girl who is quick to speak her mind and she isn't one to be intimidated by a fellow player, or the orchestra leader, or the house manager himself. And Lily particularly enjoys her rows with husband George.

Graham Payn, who has taken over the Coward roles in these plays—something of a terrifying assignment for any actor—turns an indifferent performance in "Ways and Means," but he is considerably better in the pictorial "Family Album" and he has a lot of bounce and gaiety in "Red Peppers." Philip Tonge is amusing as the doddering family butler in "Family Album" and he makes a character of the small-time house manager with the splochy face, walrus mustache and gigantic cigar, in "Red Peppers." George Jenkins has provided excellent settings.

A pleasant evening at the National. Somewhat on the sparse side, but Gertrude Lawrence is a delight, and on Monday she will have better plays to work with—"Hands Across the Sea," "Fumed Oak" and "Shadow Play."

New York Post

February 22, 1948

On Comedy of Noel Coward As Seen in 'Tonight at 8:30'

By Richard Watts Jr.

There is, I think, a tendency to take Noel Coward too much for granted these days. Because his talent is brittle and a little exotic, because his capacity for malicious and contemptuously snobbish humor is so much more considerable than his gift for genuine probing into character and emotion, because his standards so frequently seem somewhat perverse, even because his skill at the wit of insult can be so devastating—for all of these reasons there is a grave temptation to underrate his importance as a contributor to the modern theatre. It strikes me that this may be a current critical oversight.

Possibly now is not the best time to be proclaiming his merits. Certainly the first program of the Noel Coward Carnival called "Tonight at 8:30," which opened at the National Theatre Friday night, does not show him at his best. As a matter of fact, it never did. Back in the unbelievably distant days of 1936, when the Coward Carnival of short plays was first presented here, it was clear that "Ways and Means," "Family Album"

and "Red Peppers" were not among his most impressive efforts. Today, although the second two still have their engaging qualities, a lot of the freshness has gone out of them.

Then, too, there is no getting away from the fact that the absence of Mr. Coward as an actor in his own plays is a serious loss to them. Gertrude Lawrence, who played opposite him when they were originally offered, is just as magnificent as ever, if not a little more so. Assuredly she has never looked more beautiful nor played with more wonderful vitality. But it is unfortunately true that Graham Payn, the young English actor who now has the Coward roles, is by no means up to them. He works courageously, but to only mid-

dling avail.

"Red Peppers"

Of the three works, "Red Peppers" is the most successful for a couple of reasons. One is that, as the more sarcastic and belligerent member of a third-rate vaudeville team, Miss Lawrence has a delightful part, which she handles magnificently. The other is that Mr. Coward is never happier than when he has arranged a situation in which some actors can stand around and insult each other, and the insults in "Red Peppers" are those of a master. "Family Album," accurately described as "a Victorian comedy with music," which shows a sorrowing family group mourning the late head of the house, and slowly agreeing that he was a loathsome fellow, had a strange charm and humor.

The weakest of the three is "Ways and Means," which never amounted to a great deal and got off to a particularly bad start Friday night. I was scorned for my moralistic seriousness a few weeks ago when I suggested that the French comedy called "Topaze" suffered in its revival because the merriment aroused by its topic of political corruption in France seems pretty flat these days. Unawed by the jeers, I must now say that two gay and charming wasters, who persuaded an amiable burglar to rob a fellow guest at a house party, are somehow no longer engaging as "Ways and Means"

portrays them. Perhaps the times and I are growing more serious-minded.

The New Congreve?

Since the three brief works frankly do not add up into a very impressive evening's entertainment, I may be picking the wrong occasion to extol Mr. Coward's merits as a dramatist. On the other hand, it may be just the right time to do so. For even in so comparatively feeble a comedy as "Ways and Means," the virtues are noticeable. The very fact that its cynical morals seem to represent so sharply a decadent and outmoded segment of British life shows the skill of Noel Coward as a social historian. In a lesser way it is the work of a modern Congreve.

But "social historian" sounds grave, and the most characteristic Coward quality is essentially gay. It isn't altogether a pleasant gaiety. It is too filled with snobishness, cold contempt, savage scorn and a lofty distaste for common mankind for that. But it has a very definite wit and style. Furthermore, for all its air of snobbery it should be noted that the Coward talent is warmer and more sympathetic contemplating the broken-down vaudevillians of "Red Peppers" than considering the Cote d'Azur set in "Ways and Means." For all his weaknesses, Mr. Coward is a comic writer of distinction.

"Tonight at 8:30"—continued

The New York Times

February 21, 1948

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Don't look now, but twelve years have disappeared somewhere since Noel Coward's bills of one-act plays first startled this town. The years were not much good for any of us, and they have not passed Mr. Coward's plays by. With Gertrude Lawrence outdazzling the material, the first bill was put on at the National last evening. The

second bill will follow next Monday. Although "Red Peppers" is still a funny cartoon of show business, "Ways and Means" is a laborious exercise now, and "Family Album" is a frayed sentimentality.

Miss Lawrence still looks as mischievous and sinful as Eve, casts hither around her everywhere, sings in an enchantingly round and coquettish style, wears costumes magnificently and chops the wit cleanly out of the dialogue. When the "Red Peppers" sprinkles a few brisk dashes of vitality into a slow and decorous evening, Miss Lawrence whoops it up in the broad style we all loved twelve years ago—larding the vulgarity on thick.

But the glow those sketches originally spread throughout the theatre came from the acting of

Mr. Coward and Miss Lawrence together. They made an immortal pair of virtuosos. Although Graham Payne is a personable young actor with a singing voice superior to Mr. Coward's shattering croak, he lacks the master's sting and stage capacity. While "Ways and Means" and "Family Album" politely go through their five-finger exercises, we miss the brisk clicking of Mr. Coward's sharp style, the lines rattling out like machine-gun fire. There is not much point in reviving these trifles without Mr. Coward in the battery.

They were never more than trifles. But they seemed so expert twelve years ago that the trifling quality was their distinction. It transformed them into triumphs of style. "Ways and Means" is boudoir

scandal about a pair of indigent swells who take part in a fashionable larceny. Nowadays it seems to take a long time coming to the point. "Family Album" is an intricately mannered theatre piece in Victorian style with songs by Mr. Coward. It is without distinction now.

Under Mr. Coward's adroit direction, the plays are produced with taste. The cast is a good one. It includes Sarah Burton, Philip Tonga, Valerie Cossart, Rhoderick Walker and several other first-rate actors. Everything crackles except the entertainment. Even "Red Peppers," the liveliest of the lot, is hardly worth as imposing a revival, and without Mr. Coward, too.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

February 21, 1948

— By HOWARD BARNES —

Paging Noel Coward!

NOEL COWARD is badly missing in the revival of his "Tonight at 8:30," which has started a repertory engagement at the National Theater. The three playlets which constitute the original bill have not lost much of their enchantment in the passing of a decade. The Coward touch is still there in the staging; his great leading lady, Gertrude Lawrence, is as supremely artful as ever, and the incidental songs are even more mellifluous now than they were in 1936. Where the theater's jack-of-

all-trades has made a lamentable mistake is in not appearing in the vignettes which he and Miss Lawrence made so peculiarly their own.

It has always been this reviewer's contention that Coward was a better director than a performer. With the presentation of "Ways and Means," "Family Album" and "Red Peppers," he is forced to make a retraction. Even if Graham Payne, who has supplanted the author in the current revivals, were good, which he isn't, the medley of satire, vaudeville zags and farcical by-play which once seemed so wonderful is flat and disappointing without Coward's on-stage participation. It is possible that the second triptych of the original nine sketches, which will be disclosed Monday evening, will seem satisfying without Coward's acting participation. The

present exhibit needs his performing desperately.

The star of the revival is luminous, but uncertain. In "Red Peppers," in which she plays the feminine member of a small-time English music hall team, quarrels with her partner and then joins an offensive against a pompous theater manager, an alcoholic conductor and a stuffy competing vaudeville, finds her at her best. That is probably because Payne is better adapted to the part of a ham variety actor than the more subtle exigencies of his roles in "Ways and Means" and "Family Album." The last-named playlets rarely have the verve and excitement which would justify their tenuous subject matter. Miss Lawrence has moments of comic exuberance in both works, but she cannot carry them alone.

The assistants in these dramatic fragments never amounted to much. At the National, Philip Tonge does the major work in supplying body to tenuous scripts. He is excellent as the doddering butler in "Family Album," who joins in a festive family party, when the supposedly grieving members discover that their mean father's final will was burned before they found themselves cut off. He is right enough as the theater manager in "Red Peppers." Rhoderick Walker helps a bit in "Ways and Means" as he extricates a couple of dead beats from a financial jam, and Norah Howard, Valerie Cossart and Sarah Burton do what they can with their assignments. Coward has forgot ten to ply one of his trades in "Tonight at 8:30." It makes the inaugural of the engagement inauspicious.

Daily Mirror

February 21, 1948

'Tonight at 8:30' Has Lawrence Sparkle

By ROBERT COLEMAN

If Manhattan in the vicinity of 41st St. and 7th Ave. seemed brighter last evening, it was not due to installation of additional lights thereabouts by the city fathers but to the return to Broadway of the incandescent Gertrude Lawrence.

Homer Curran, Russell Lewis and Howard Young are presenting Miss Lawrence at the National Theatre in a revival of Noel Coward's "Tonight at 8:30," a sparkling collection of sketches.

The opening bill comprised "Ways and Means," wherein a couple of bankrupt social parasites aid a gentleman's gentleman to pliffer the poke, swollen with roulette winnings, of a

nasty neighbor; "Family Album," a graceful, bittersweet skit in which a rakish father's misdeeds become apparent to his children when he expires, and "Red Peppers," a hilarious burlesque of music hall Westphalianism.

These mannered and amusing comments on people and institutions are brilliantly played by Miss Lawrence and her associates under the superb direction of author Coward.

A more perfect job of miming has not been observed by us in several semesters than the Cowardians offer in "Family Album." Clockwork pace, flawless timing, beautifully conceived ensembles make it a masterpiece of showmanship.

Miss Lawrence is a great star, a dazzling personality and a super box office magnet. There have been occasions in the past when we thought her just a little

too coy and cute. But those qualities, we are delighted to report, were absent last night.

We were given a new Lawrence. A more subdued Lawrence. A Lawrence who subordinated individual scoring to teamwork. Here was a star who played expertly and generously to make those about her also shine like stars. We like the new Lawrence and believe you will, too.

Replacing Coward as leading man is Graham Payne, another gifted Briton. Payne lacks the glitter, the bite and the brittleness of Coward, but is personable, ingratiating and skilful.

"Tonight at 8:30" will be one of the most pleasant spots on local watches as long as Miss Lawrence chooses to tenant the National.

February 21, 1948

'Tonight at 8:30' Revived, Stirs Only Glimmer of Ex-Glamor

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

The revival of "Tonight at 8:30" is strangely more educational than entertaining. It comes as rather a shock that only a dozen years ago this sort of chic froth could have been sensational. Now its whole manner is dated and lackadaisical. Of the glitter and glamour that once shone through the short plays, there is only a glimmer left.

The first bill opens with "Ways and Means," the tale of a mooching couple who have "no marketable talent." They have worn out their welcome at the house they are visiting and have not even the funds to move in on another

hapless family.

They are an utterly worthless pair, who no longer have the charm which might have justified their presence as house guests.

Their problem is solved when the chauffeur of a friend tries to rob them and they drive him to rob a fellow guest who has made a killing at a casino.

The carefree usefulness of the duo seemed smart and enviable in the play's earlier days. Now it is not even retrospectively amusing. One would rather like the husband and wife to be put out of earshot in a debtors' prison somewhere.

The second item is "Family Album," a slight musical comedy

of a Victorian family's genteel wake. It is transparent and uneventful, with its maudlin hypocrisy, as the mourners slowly admit that they despised the dead head of the family.

The play is rarely lightened by Gertrude Lawrence's patent impertinence as an in-law. Lovely to look at, like a dour Valentine, it wanders off into space like a gentle breeze.

The final number is the old vaudeville sketch called "Red Peppers," which has more vitality than the preceding plays.

Here a team does its sailor songs and dances, fights with the house manager and the orchestra leader and gets its come-uppance when it goes on for the second half of the bill.

In one sense this is a sordid little sketch, but it has a pathetic reality and humor that makes it timeless. The sad pretentiousness of the actors, their earthy vulgarity and their disdain for cleanliness all make incisive comment on a bygone profession.

The satire of a dead form of entertainment, and the autopsy on undistinguished pride, keep the play as keen as it ever was.

It is a pity that Mr. Coward is

no, playing in the sketches because he has an infinitely correct sense of just how deftly non-sensational they must be.

Glamorous Miss Lawrence has all the tricks down pat, but her heart does not often seem to be in her work. Last night she was playing as if this was the weary end of a long run.

Graham Payn, who is currently playing the Coward roles in the sketches, is a personable actor who does not manage to contribute any great color to the plays. He is most efficient and never does anything wrong, but he gives the impression of doing exactly what he has been told, rather than acting with any great spontaneity.

The supporting cast, all of it appearing in bits, is as good as it has a chance to be. Philip Tonge brings mellow humor to the ancient butler in the family meeting, and Norah Howard is tops in her instant as a fading dramatic actress in the vaudeville sketch.

The most memorable moments of the evening are the tableaux of "Family Album" and the raucous sordidness of "Red Peppers." All in all, the program has the atmosphere of a disinterment.



February 23, 1948

Kronenberger

Three Coward Trifles After Twelve Years

Tonight at 8:30 hasn't mellowed with age, like wine; it has merely got puckered and wrinkled, like cocoa. Not that the playlets offered Friday night were ever among my passions; but I don't recall that in 1936 *Ways and Means*, for example, was close to a pet hate. It seemed to have more flash and verve about it then; and *Family Album* more nostalgic mockery and style. And of course Mr. Coward was very



much tied up in it all; he and Miss Lawrence were very much a team. But now Graham Payn is in Mr. Coward's shoes and cannot fill them; and for two-thirds of the way, the evening has a harsh high-styled nastiness, and a tired tinkly jauntiness, that are very little fun. Only at the close, in *Red Peppers*—when the chi-chi is finally combed out of the billingsgate, and Mr. Payn performs much better, and Miss Lawrence performs at her best—are matters entertaining and lively. But by that time, even red peppers can't burn the unpleasant taste out of one's mouth.

These playlets are very unimportant Coward, but they are nonetheless

less very typical; and Mr. Coward himself is so very important a symbol of our time, so very successful and clever a writer for our age, that it somehow seems one's duty to try to account for one's distaste. Just why should so much of him, in the midst of exciting our laughter, set our teeth on edge; and just why should so little of him ever excite us to laughter more than once? Just why, again, should there seem only something brittle, and never anything solid, to his worldliness? If we are to find him ancestors, they must be our writers of social comedy, our satirists of manners; and yet he is only partly of their blood. For they heaved to a line far more than he does, in temperament no less than in taste. They were not merely sharp-eyed, they were hard-headed: a Jane Austen could no more have written *Cavalcade* or *In Which We Serve* than Dostoevski could have written *John Loves Mary*. Jane Austen or Congreve or even Sheridan, again, can let us banquet on the bad taste and bad manners of society, and themselves come through unscathed; we know exactly where they stand in relation to every one of their characters: they have not merely exhibited them, they have assessed them.

With Mr. Coward, it is very different: we can only be sure of his satiric perceptions, never of his sense of values. We cannot be

sure, for instance, whether he regards the hard-up couple in *Ways and Means* as unspeakable, or merely unfortunate; or whether the butler in *Family Album*, in addition to being a spoof on the perfect Victorian servant, is not what Mr. Coward rather admires in servants himself.

Yet he is enough in the line of the Congreves to make us wonder why he merely emerges as the most gifted jack-of-all-trash of our age. His very versatility—his sorties into the sentimental and fantastic and melodramatic—explain it a little; your true master of social comedy keeps his gifts in a cool dry place; and his eye consistently on the object. Coward too, I suppose, always keeps his eye on the object; but the object is always his audience; he is first and last and always a showman. That is his real vulgarity—a vulgarity of intentions. Hence we are happiest with him when he is writing pure fantasy or farce, a *Blithe Spirit* or a crazy ditty; when there is no possible meaning, when there is only an effect. But it is a pity, as the first two playlets on Friday night made clear, that so gifted a man should have settled for being an entertainer at any cost; for the moment an entertainer ceases to be entertaining, he ceases to exist. —LOUIS KRONENBERGER

"Mister Roberts"

The New York Times

February 19, 1948

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

By rounding up a crew of American ruffians, Thomas Hegggen and Joshua Logan have written the ideal romantic play about the war. They call it "Mister Roberts." With Henry Fonda giving a winning performance, it was wonderfully well acted at the Alvin last evening. Literate people report that the resemblance to Mr. Hegggen's novel of the same title is not too exacting. On the stage in the midst of some of Jo Mielziner's sea-going scenery, "Mister Roberts" is a gusty, ribald and sentimental yarn about some brawling seamen in an American rust-bucket on the Pacific.

Although it is a war play, it is ingeniously irrelevant. For this is the blistering saga of the men on a cargo vessel who have never heard a shot fired in anger. Lieutenant Roberts, junior grade and

executive officer of AK 601, is eating out his heart for a combat assignment. But his commander is a hard-bitten sea-bully who hates college men like Roberts, drives his crew in the hope of getting a promotion and spreads misery and hatred throughout the ship. What plot the play has concerns a generous sacrifice, Roberts makes to get shore liberty for his men, a misunderstanding that in justly divides him from them and a hilarious event that puts the whole ship wonderfully at ease again.

Since there is a script, it is accurate to say that "Mister Roberts" has been written. But the parts have been cast with so much relish and the direction is so spontaneous that it gives the impression of having been written on the stage during rehearsals. After a war is safely over, men can afford to recollect it joyously. The romance of "Mister Roberts" consists in recalling it in terms of comradeship, and the humor consists in giving it comic distortions so that it is outsize and overwhelming. The lines are hilarious. The humor has the irony and self-disparaging twist of Yankee jargon; it has also the habit of putting sneering and generalizing labels on ordinary things. All the men who respond to sick call, for

example, are the doctors' "hypochondriacs." Dipping back into some leisurely memories, the authors have come up with an uproarious play.

Now that Mr. Fonda is back after eleven years, it would be nice to have him back for good. He has brought quite a lot of good with him this time. As Roberts he is lanky and unheroic, relaxed and genuine; he neatly skirts the maudlin when the play grows sentimental, and he skillfully underplays the bombastic scenes. As a whacky shipmate with big ideas but small accomplishments, David Wayne, the late leprechaun, also gives a darlin' performance. Robert Keith's cynically loyal doctor and man of the world is acted with sardonic perfection, and William Harrigan's tyrannical, crude master has authentic character.

For a few delirious moments the men of the AK 601 see an American girl. She is brightly played by Jocelyn Brando. But the chief pleasures of the play are the rag-tag crew of self-respecting ruffians acted by some of the brainiest members of Actors Equity.

Under Mr. Logan's idiomatic direction, the performance rolls through a thundering evening of tough humors—well-paced, well-timed and picturesque. Thanks,

'MISTER ROBERTS.'

Play by Thomas Hegggen and Joshua Logan; based on the novel by Thomas Hegggen; directed by Joshua Logan; settings and lighting by Jo Mielziner; presented by Leland Hayward at the Alvin Theatre Wednesday evening, February 18, 1948. The cast: Chief Johnson—Rusty Lane; Lieutenant (Jr.) Roberts—Henry Fonda; Doc—Robert Keith; Dewey—Joe Marr; The Captain—William Harrigan; Insignia—Harvey Lembeck; Mannion—Ralph Meeker; Lindstrom—Karl Lukas; Stefanowski—Steven Hill; Wiley—Robert Bates; Schlemmer—Leo Kriger; Baber—John Campbell; Ensign Pulver—David Wayne; Delan—Casey Walters; Gerhart—Fred Barton; Payas—James Shaver; Lieutenant Ann Girard—Jocelyn Brando; Shore Patrolman—John Jordan; Military Policeman—Marshall Jamison; Shore Patrol Officer—Morris Hamilton; Seaman, fireman and others—Tiger Andrews, Joe Bernard, Ellis Kriger, Mike Kane, Bob Keith Jr., Walter Mullen, John (Red) Kullera, Jack Pierce, Len Smith Jr. and Sanders (Sandy) Turner.

Synopsis—About the U. S. Navy Cargo Ship AK 601, operating the last great voyage of the Pacific. Time: A few weeks before V. E. Day until a few weeks before V. J. Day.

Mr. Hegggen and Mr. Logan, for "Mister Roberts" and a royal good time.



February 20, 1948

Kronenberger

A Winning Comedy—And a Great Big Hit

Never did a show containing no music and just one female draw a more glittering first-night audience than Mr. Roberts. But then never did a show arrive on Broadway preceded by more glittering out-of-town reports.

Concerning its merits, the excitable had turned delirious, the staid had waxed excited, and the non-committal had freely committed themselves. Mr. Roberts was

to be the smash comedy hit of the season, or perhaps many seasons.

Well, it will be; and as popular

playwriting goes, it completely deserves to be. It's a good show immeasurably enhanced by a wonderful production. Moreover it has the merit—which has almost come to seem like an artistic merit—of being much better during the second half of the evening than during the first. The best of it can be called—what almost every Broadway comedy hit is miscalled—uproariously funny. The rest of it can be called amusing, agreeable, rowdy, slick, human, lively, now and then rather touching, and now and then—perhaps for uncomic relief—mildly boring. And personally, I thought Mr. Roberts too long. But I'm sure that most people will think it all too short.

From Thomas Hegggen's novel, which I unfortunately have never

read, Mr. Hegggen and Joshua Logan have carefully worked out, and skilfully worked up, and plainly worked over, a theater-piece about life on a cargo ship somewhere in the Pacific during the last months of the war. The chief fact of that life was its awful sameness and uneventfulness and boredom, a point the authors are emphatic but not expansive about, their object being less to communicate such gray emotions than to show what they gave rise to. Among men who could never get away from one another, or from themselves, they gave rise to scraps. Among men balked of the more popular grown-up amusements, they gave rise to pranks. And among men endlessly able to study their fellowmen at close range, they gave rise to particular antipathies and loyalties. And the particular hate of the crew of AK 601 was for the fumbling Captain who was not the softer for having come up the hard way; while its special love was for Lieut. (Jr.) Roberts, who spiked most of the Captain's orders, and was all the time trying desperately to get transferred to a combat area.

What plot there is is born of Mr. Roberts' brushes with the Captain, and of his agreeing to knuckle under if the Captain will grant the crew shore leave that they desperately need. Knowing nothing of Roberts' part, the crew are aston-

ished—and infuriated—by his sudden docility, only to idolize him the more when they find out the cause of it. What plot there is, in other words, is that of a boys' book with some bad words thrown in; but to a large extent these people had undoubtedly come to live in a boys' world. And fortunately Henry Fonda gives an exemplary performance as Mr. Roberts, neither ostentatiously underplaying his manly role in the British manner, nor somewhere hamming it after the manner of Hollywood.

All the same, Mr. Hegggen and Mr. Logan are for me in the excellent company of Scott and Dickens, whose heroes are seldom much fun but whose minor characters are often joys forever. It's the Captain and the crew and the other officers that give Mr. Roberts its liveliest color, its rowdiest talk, its humanest touches, its funniest scenes, its loudest laughs. And under Mr. Logan's very brilliant direction and against Mr. Mielziner's just-right sets—the cast plays all these characters to the Queen's taste, and to the hilt. In the larger roles, William Harrigan makes a great deal out of the Captain, as does David Wayne out of a screwy fellow-officer; but it is Robert Keith as the ship's doctor who gives the most telling performance in what is likely to prove the most popular comedy that Broadway has seen in years.

—LOUIS KRONENBERGER

New York World-Telegram

February 19, 1948

All Hands Are Cited in 'Mister Roberts'

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

It may very well be that while you read this a good 90 per cent of last night's audience is still in the Alvin Theater applauding and yelling for "Mister Roberts."

What a hilarious and heart rending play it is! There is a new kind of hero for the theater here.

The dramatization of his story is ingenious, because his identity is the very fact that he is overwhelmed by tedium and monotony.

This is the story of the man behind the lines of war, who laboriously supplies the wherewithal for others to fight. His virtue is involuntary endurance, and the wonder of him is that he keeps sane.

Here he is aboard a small cargo ship, plying between inactive islands in the Pacific. A sadistic,

ambitious captain drives his men and denies them the meager leave that comes in reach, in order to build up a record for his own promotion.

The executive officer, Mister Roberts is a safety valve for the raw tempers that heat, work and boredom have bred.

There is a simple purity about this man that all the others respect. His authority is firm, but he is human. He also has a potential greatness in his sincere need to dedicate himself to actual battle. It is almost as if he knew he was destined to die for the victory, and his assignment here was mistaken. But even this calling is a private matter, for he is neither the kind of man to flaunt it, nor one to take his disappointment out on others.

The captain knows how much Roberts is responsible for the ship's good record, the record that has won him a coveted potted palm from the admiral. And he will not approve the weekly request for transfer his exec. submits.

Finally Roberts makes a deal with the captain which wins the crew shore leave.

For a while the crew believes he has broken faith with them. When they learn the truth, their gestures have the direct simple greatness that is Roberts' own quality.

The play is a triumph and expression in theater of the successful but much less unified novel. The comic element is rich and constant, with emphasis given the incidents of spying on the nurses,

the bacchanalian shore leave, Pulver's magnificent firecracker, and of course the disposition of the symbolic palm.

The scenes that tighten your throat are played with dignified pathos, but they are picked up in sharp times to avoid becoming in the least maudlin. To anyone who has experienced this sort of craven plague in war time, the first half of the drama may lean too far toward a mirth which is never manifest under the circumstances.

It is the richness of this objective comedy, however, that gives the play a balance to absorb the heartiest wrenches of the

final scenes.

Voices over a public address system, against a flat drop of the ship's hull, fill the brief interludes between scenes, so the action moves easily from the deck to various cabins and back.

The cast deserves a blanket promotion, with medals for valorous conduct. As Mr. Roberts, Henry Fonda is giving a great performance. He performs with innate simplicity, blending in undertones of charity and anguish that not only make the character a true person, but more importantly verify the passionate masculine devotion of the crew.

David Wayne paints a rich portrait of the lustful and somewhat mad officer who unwillingly inherits Roberts' job. Robert Keith could not be improved upon as the dry and humorously philosophical doctor. And William Harrigan pulls no punches in making the captain bitter and ruthless.

Of the many members of the crew, it is hard to select those most deserving of mention, for the smallest bits are so well cast. Joe Marr is a steadfast Dowdy, and Harvey Lembeck is a fiery talkative Insignia.

Casey Walters is fine as Dolan, and Murray Hamilton has an expert bit as a Shore Patrol Officer from Alabama. Karl Lukas, Steven Hill and Robert Baines add individual color and character to the ship's personnel.

Journal-American

February 19, 1948

Takes Rightful Place In B'way Hit Parade

By ROBERT GARLAND

With the radio growing more and more afraid of its own voice and the movies growing more and more afraid of their own shadows, it's wonderful to realize that the theatre can still stand up and speak out like a man.

And stand up and speak out like a man it does in "Mister Roberts" which, at the Alvin, has taken its rightful place in the Broadway hit parade.

This "Mister Roberts" is, as almost everybody knows, the Thomas Heggen-Joshua Logan dramatization of Mr. Heggen's best-selling biography of a cargo-ship named Reluctant. Presented by Leland Hayward, with Henry Fonda as star, with David Wayne, Robert Keith and William Harrigan as featured players, it looks like a big beautiful must-see to me.

It looks like a big beautiful must-see to last night's distin-

guished congregation if the long, lusty laughter, the quiet tender tears, can be taken as criteria. And I'm sure they can! Not this season has a first audience so entered into the spirit of a play, not even at the opening of "Command Decision" or "A Streetcar Named Desire."

It's right along with these, the William Wister Haines war-play and the Tennessee Williams peace-play, that this Thomas Heggen-Joshua Logan peace-in-war play belongs. And along with them it'll stay! You'll find it at the Alvin for many a month to come.

Held on Chair's Edge

There're times when I wish I knew a "good play" when I see it. This isn't one of them. "Ghosts," they tell me, is a good play at the Cort. Very well, then; you take Mr. Alving and I'll take Mr. Rob-

erts. After watching the comic-tragedy at the Alvin, I don't seem to care whether "Mister Roberts" is a good play or whether it isn't.

For when a play can hold me on my chair's edge, laughing outrageously with tears behind my laughter, it's good enough for me. With episodes that are funny without being forced, outspoken without being objectionable, and tragic without being lugubrious, that's what the new tenant of the Alvin is—a play that's good enough for me. Or you. Or anybody.

It has to do with Lieutenant (Jr.) Roberts, Cargo Officer and First Lieutenant of the U.S.S. Reluctant, Naval Auxiliary A-833 operating in the back areas of the Pacific. The captain is his enemy, the crew his problem child. Between the two, he's out on a limb. And his balancing act, plus his desire to get off "this old bucket" and fight, is the play.

And a big beautiful must-see of a play it is, with its all-too-human beings—the whole world in miniature—acting like themselves and reacting, one to the other, with the great smallness and the small greatness of the so-called human race.

Cast All Excellent

Seldom, in my theatregoing days, have the actors and their acting been so much a part and

parcel of the play. Henry Fonda, for instance, who is the Mister Roberts of the title, a "kind of hero" who holds the Reluctant, its crummy captain and its courageous crew miraculously together, respected by the former, worshipped by the latter, and every inch a man.

David Wayne, freed from his leprechaunian spell, is the one actor for Ensign Pulver, just as he was the one actor for Og, the leprechaun. Robert Keith is the only Doc you can possibly imagine.

And William Harrigan, acting like a dastard for the first time, is a Captain worthy of the hatred of his men. He rates those marbles in his overboard!

But over one of the thirty visible members of the Captain's crew is worthy of mention here. And Marion Brando's sister Jocelyn is an alluring Lt. Ann Girard. Small wonder those wolves in ship's clothing focus their binoculars on her. As for Jo Mielziner's good ship Reluctant, and Joshua Logan's good sharp direction, they're perfect...

Perfect, too, is all of "Mister Roberts." Packing a prodigious punch in which are noisy laughs, quiet tears and a luminous belief in the rough-and-ready rightness of the young American way, it's grand entertainment that puts those upstairs, the radio and the movies, in their obviously inferior places.

"Mister Roberts"—continued

NEW YORK
Herald Tribune
February 19, 1948

By HOWARD BARNES

To All Hands, "Well Done!"

A SUPERIOR novel has been fashioned into a magnificent play in "Mister Roberts." The new production at the Alvin Theatre has heart, humor, profound meaning and an almost intolerable emotional tension. In its lusty and stirring testament to the men who fought without glory in the back areas of the Pacific, it has no peers among war dramas. Thomas Heggen and Joshua Logan have adapted the former's book with tremendous resourcefulness and artistry. Henry Fonda and a perfect company play it to the hilt on a series of dramatic

planes. And Jo Mielziner has given it backgrounds which are supremely complementary to the action. Here, indeed, is a memorable stage work.

As those who read the Heggen original know, "Mister Roberts" is concerned with the terrible monotony and boredom of warfare, particularly for those not engaged in combat. The scenes are all set on the grimy "bucket," the Navy Cargo Ship, AK 601. They range from the turbulence of a fight between crew members, whose nerves have reached the breaking point, or the wild return from the first shore leave in over a year, to the savage pact made by Mister Roberts and his captain and the poignant climax as word comes that the Lieutenant (Jg) has been killed a few days before VJ Day, after being transferred to a destroyer. They are illuminated by an acute realization that 167 guys

can be bound together in an unglamorous mission. They are tough, stringent and irresistible.

The core of the show is the fierce and frequently frustrated effort of Mister Roberts to escape from a shuttle between tedium and ennui and get a valid passport into our war effort. It has many facets, as the cargo officer fights for his men, they in turn forge his transfer and he wonders whether he is right in forsaking his fellows. Fonda, returning to the theater after years of admirable screen acting, plumbs to the depths of the play's inner significance. He is every inch a star at the Alvin. At the same time, it is the wonderful surrounding portrayals that give "Mister Roberts" heroic dimensions.

Robert Keith is superbly cynical and understanding as the ship's

doctor, who keeps the lieutenant clear in the head as well as valiant. As the captain, William Harrigan gives a corrosive performance, as he lets his junior officer know that he hates his guts for his education and special privilege, David Wayne is immense as a lazy and lecherous ensign, who learns to fight, even on a "bucket" and Joe Marr, Harvey Lembeck, Ralph Meeker, Steven Hill and Rusty Lane are some of the others who take a spectator right onto a lowly cargo ship for upwards of two hours. The one actress, Jocelyn Brando, is altogether right as a nurse who drives women-hungry men crazy for a brief interlude. The talk is often rough but never offensive. The Logan staging is nothing short of miraculous. With Mielziner's help he has mounted a tumultuous and moving drama, that no one who witnesses it will soon forget.

Daily Mirror

February 19, 1948

'Mr. Roberts' Solid Comedy Smash

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Producing successes is getting to be a habit with Leland Hayward. Having first scored with "A Bell for Adano," which had an Army background, he now comes through with another huge hit in "Mister Roberts," a saga of the Navy.

Thomas Heggen and Joshua Logan have done an admirable job of converting Heggen's novel into a salty, rowdy, hilarious play. They have adroitly kept the story line and sacrificed none of the fascinating characters.

"Mister Roberts" takes you for a delightful voyage on a Navy

supply ship during the war. She is skippered by a disagreeable incompetent, who refuses to recommend a transfer to more active service for Lt. Roberts.

Roberts wants to get into battle. He feels wasted on a tub that wallows through relatively safe seas, in remote areas of the Pacific. But his captain, realizing

Roberts' value in maintaining morale and rolling up loading records, selfishly blocks all his efforts to escape to the fighting sectors.

How Roberts, with the aid of a loyal crew, eventually manages to get the berth he wants, just in time to be killed by a Jap suicide plane, had the first nighters at the Alvin Theatre howling last night.

Co-author Logan also merits a 21-gun salute for his casting and direction. Though the script is episodic, it plays at express-train speed. There isn't a lull in its two lengthy acts.

Brought on from Hollywood, Henry Fonda breathes life into the title role. He plays the efficient, popular Roberts with honesty, restraint and unshowy skill. William Harrigan, Robert Keith and David Wayne are just as perfect as the supply ships' other officers. Jocelyn Brando, the only woman in the company, makes the most of a brief ap-

pearance.

No rusty tramp ever had a more amusing crew than Rusty Lane, Joe Marr, Harvey Lembeck, Ralph Meeker, Karl Lukas, Steven Hill, Robert Baines, Lee Krieger, John Campbell, Casey Walters, Fred Barten and James Sherwood. Marshall Jamison, too, has a field day as a drawly, Southern MP.

Jo Mielziner has designed realistic sets that shift quickly.

We'll wager that "Mister Roberts" proves a top legit ticket at the brokers. It's immensely funny. Its characters are people—lusty, recognizable, greatly likeable people. It offers more enjoyment and excitement than any cruise Cook's could book for you.

If you hope to see "Mister Roberts" soon, you'd better hop over to the Alvin immediately and get your ducats. Long lines will be forming at the box office by the time you read this rave review of the season's smash comedy click.

DAILY NEWS

February 19, 1948

'Mr. Roberts' Delightfully Staged Comedy Click About Life in Navy

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Everything which is wonderful and happy about the theatre—good writing, skilled acting, masterful staging, all the elements which once in a while can be found so vibrantly alive in a playhouse—came together at the Alvin last evening—click!

The occasion was the first performance of "Mister Roberts," by Thomas Heggen and Joshua Logan. If it were boiled down, there wouldn't be much to this comedy

about life aboard a Navy cargo vessel in the backwaters of the war in the Pacific—but who would want it boiled down? It should be left as it is, bubbling and expansive, human and exuberant, for the

delight of the many who will be wanting to see it during the next couple of seasons.

Henry Fonda, playing the title role as a junior-grade lieutenant aboard the AK 601, is billed in the program as the star of the play, and rightly; but this is not to say that every man jack aboard the old "bucket" does not do his duty. There are thirty men in the com-

pany, and one girl manages to get aboard for about three amusing minutes, and I don't think a better crew could possibly be assembled. From William Harrigan, the captain, and Robert Keith, the doctor, and David Wayne, the ensign in charge of laundry and morale, right down to the shabbiest drunk who is hauled aboard in a cargo net after a shore leave, the company is utterly engaging.

"Mister Roberts" is based on Mr. Heggen's novel about the boredom

which is the only enemy threatening a naval vessel which has been 5,000 miles from battle for a couple of years or more. It is often rough in speech, but not, I think, offensively so—for the talk is real and not lugged in. It should be instructive, rather than shocking, to Aunt Minnie.

Every line of the dramatization bears the signature of Mr. Logan, who, being one of the very best

"Mister Roberts"—continued

directors in the American theatre, knows just what sort of material a director should be given to work with. The humor and the perfect timing with which it is delivered make "Mister Roberts" a superlative comedy.

Bravery Against Deadly Enemy.

Lieut. Roberts, cargo officer, is worshiped by his men, but he is

eating out his heart because he wants to be in the fighting war. His is a continuing battle with the captain—a battle to get a transfer, which the captain refuses to grant. Finally the men get it for him, and he is killed in action; but before he is killed he has come to realize that the happy-go-lucky crew of his old "bucket," who have only

ennui to fight, are the bravest of the brave.

At a later time I shall want to tell you more about this play—about such hilarious scenes as the spyglass discovery of a nurses' shower on a distant island, and the return from shore leave of seven men who have busted up an Army party; about the playing of sub-

ordinate roles by Rusty Lane, Harvey Lembeck and others, and about the fine setting by Jo Mielziner.

Last night the audience wouldn't go home until Mr. Fonda made a speech. Said he: "This is all Tom and Josh wrote for us. If you want we can start all over again." I hung around a while, hoping they would.

New York Post

February 19, 1948

A Brilliant Smash Hit Called 'Mister Roberts'

By RICHARD WATTS JR.

The season's latest resounding hit is "Mister Roberts," and it richly deserves all of its assured triumph. Last night at the Alvin Theatre not even the rapturously enthusiastic advance notices seemed too much for it. The play which Thomas Heggen and Joshua Logan have fashioned from Mr. Heggen's wartime novel about life on a Navy cargo boat in the back areas of the Pacific is such warm, full-blooded, hilarious and moving entertainment, in addition to its impressive qualities as honest and forthright dramatic writing, that it is difficult to see how any theatregoer could fail to be delighted by it.

The theatre can be a very ex-

citing place when everything goes just as it should, and that is what happens with "Mister Roberts." The play itself is skillful and of a sound heart and mind. Mr. Logan's direction is brilliant, knowing and vigorously alive. Jo Mielziner's settings are perfect in both their imagination and their realism. The casting, down to the military policeman and the shore patrol officer, is ideal. In the leading role Henry Fonda is splendidly what he should be, and so is every member of the cast. Everything moves smoothly and inevitably, and there is no sign of a waste motion or a loose end.

Crew and Captain

There isn't much plot. As you probably know already, "Mister Roberts" is about the bored, weary and restless crew of a Navy cargo ship thousands of miles back of the battle areas, and the handsome, thoughtful and idealistic young lieutenant, junior grade, whom they love, and the savage, incompetent captain whom they hate. Young Roberts is eating his heart out because he is aching to get into

combat, and the captain is growing increasingly drunken and brutal because he knows his own incompetence and unpopularity.

In both characters the play could easily have gone wrong. Lieutenant Roberts, with his kindness, modesty and goodness of heart might readily have become merely a prig and a bore. The captain could have emerged as a melodramatic villain. Instead the lieutenant actually becomes humorous, human and as admirable as the crew thinks he is, while the captain, with his envy, his bitterness and his awareness of his own inferiority, is completely understandable in his hatred for the handsome, popular young officer who is everything that he isn't. In the conflict between them, there is no doubt where one's sympathy lies, but the struggle is a human one.

Rowdy Humor

Chiefly the story is told in terms of wonderful rowdy humor. The language and the conduct are often extremely frank, but there is never the feeling that the frankness is meant as sensationalism. It is never offen-

sive because it is so right and so natural. For all its racy and delightful comedy, however, "Mister Roberts" is essentially a touching and deeply felt play, which rings beautifully true as a decent, honest tribute to a man who is seen unashamedly as a hero. That is one of the fine qualities of the play. It does not deny the existence of quiet heroism, and it succeeds in presenting it believably.

That young Roberts is so credible as both a human being and a hero worthy of the crew's devotion is a tribute to Mr. Fonda, who, in his quiet, unforced way, gives a brilliant performance in a role that could have seemed annoying rather than likeable. William Harrigan makes the captain equally real. David Wayne emerges from "Finian's Rainbow" to play an engaging ensign with humorous charm, and Robert Keith is delightful as an understanding naval doctor. Indeed every performance deserves individual mention. "Mister Roberts" is a blessing to us all.

The Sun

February 19, 1948

By WARD MOREHOUSE.

'Mister Roberts' Is Magnificent.

The uproar in adjacent cities in recent weeks over the project known as "Mister Roberts" is now understandable; the road's verdict is overwhelmingly sustained. Here's a

***** sharp, vehement and enormously entertaining play that immediately takes its place as the finest that the second world war has produced. And it belongs, definitely, in the glorious category of "What Price Glory."

"Mister Roberts" is ringing theater. It is a hearty chronicle of life aboard a sorry old bucket, a Navy cargo ship, on dreary wartime missions in the untroubled areas of the tropical Pacific, and with 167 bored young men in the crew. It's a play that presents, in two capital acts and a series of smooth-changing scenes, the restlessness, the tedium, the humors, the brawls, the gallantry and the hatred—for the surly and

***** crusty captain—of seamen who saw the war far from the combat zone.

The astonishing playwrighting team of Thomas Heggen and Joshua Logan wrote "Mister Roberts." They have packed it with

a vast amount of emotion and have crammed it with gusty, jolting, stinging humor. There is bitter conflict between the roar-

ing captain and the ship's cargo officer, Mister Roberts, a college man and idolized by the crew.

The captain has all the better of it for a time, coming to bargain with the valuable Roberts, who yearns for combat duty and who agrees to cease his applications for a transfer on condition that the crew will be given liberty, the first in fourteen months, at a tropical port. But Lieut. (j. g.) Roberts eventually gets his transfer by a ruse worked out by 167 specialists in mischief, and it's soon afterward that the tale of United States Navy Cargo Ship AK 601 reaches its poignant conclusion.

"Mister Roberts" has been superbly directed by Joshua Logan, who mastered that exacting trade before he turned to playwrighting. It has been given stunningly realistic scenery by Jo Mielziner, and it is played for all it's worth, which is a couple of million, by Leland Hayward's excellent cast.

Henry Fonda distinguishes himself as Mister Roberts, for whom the crew would go into open mutiny. Fonda plays the idealistic lieutenant quietly, leisurely and expertly. William Harrigan, son

of the immortal Ned, has been in quest of a good role for a long time; he has one as the bullying captain, who came up the hard way and cherishes a loathing for college men. Robert Keith plays the able, sardonic and understanding ship's doctor with fine effect, and David Wayne, in the part of the prankful Ensign Pulver, is tremendously amusing.

Jocelyn Brando is pert and pretty and appealing—very appealing to the sex-hungry crew—in the role of the Army nurse who comes a-visiting. There are lusty and hearty performances from such seamen as Harvey Lembeck, Joe Marr, Ralph Meeker and Casey Walters. And an unforgettable bit from Murray Hamilton as a Shore Patrol officer.

Those who are guided by this corner's playgoing recommendations are urged to descend upon the Alvin instantly, but Ensign Pulver's ingenuity will probably be needed to get seats. This new Heggen-Logan play, based on the Heggen novel, is the play that will give you the most for your money in the Broadway market today.

"Mister Roberts" is positively magnificent.

"The Old Lady Says 'No!'"

The Dublin Gate Theater Company is playing a limited repertory engagement. Except for their initial presentation space permits us to reproduce only four newspaper reviews of each presentation.

The New York Times

February 18, 1948

Gate Theatre From Dublin Puts On Denis Johnston's 'The Old Lady Says "No!"'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Obviously Denis Johnston's "The Old Lady Says 'No!'" is for the ears of Irishmen. And obviously too much of it is too close to gibberish. The faults of the romantic drama that the Gate Players put on at the Mansfield last evening are easy enough to perceive and define. But Mr. Johnston, whose "The Moon in the Yellow River" is still cherished in this town, has the imagination and golden speech of an Irish poet, and he is worth considerable respecting. With the able and inventive assistance of a virtuoso troupe, he has written a bitter lament for Ireland and also the kind of freehand, turbulent, unrealistic drama that enriches the theatre and ought to be encouraged. "The Old Lady Says 'No!'"

is more fascinating than many plays that are more expert. It brings the stale modern theatre to life.

Nobody but an Irishman would dare speak so contemptuously of Ireland. Using Robert Emmet, the patriotic martyr, as his model, Mr. Johnston has written a poetic fantasy that dwells on the degradation, cheapness, pretentiousness and lack of self-respect in modern Ireland. Literally, it is supposed to represent the disordered dreams of an actor playing Robert Emmet who has had a tap on the head. Using frequent chorus interludes, the play satirizes the present life of Ireland; and, in one scene of shadow drama, it reminds Ireland of her great men and quotes some of their noblest statements. To a patriotic Irishman this must be more pertinent than it is to Americans, and also incendiary stuff.

Although the quality of Mr. Johnston's play is superb, the faults are hardly negligible. The conventional length of a theatre evening is too great to sustain the fantastic mood. "The Old Lady Says 'No!'" not only seems too long but is. As in the case of other experimental dramas of this kaleidoscopic nature, a trained newspaper copy-reader could pull it together by

blue-penciling the trivial and the repetitious. Also, Mr. Johnston does not always take himself at his highest level. Writing out of passionate conviction, he should at least respect his medium and keep at a high poetic level. But he shakes cheap-jack grimaces along the way as though he were truckling. Poetry is the natural medium of the theatre. Especially if he is gifted, like Mr. Johnston, a poet does not have to burlesque it.

The Gate Theatre mummerys have met him evenly. Under Hilton Edwards' thoroughly practical direction the performance is an interesting professional of moods and caprices. We used to call this sort of thing expressionism; perhaps we should call it surrealism today. As Robert Emmet, the valiant patriot, Micheal Mac Liammoir gives a fine, swaggering, rolling performance in a wide style that ought to delight any actor. In the earliest scene he is entertainingly ham. But when the wheel of Mr. Johnston's fantasy begins to turn and Robert Emmet goes blundering unrecognized through a lazy Ireland that has forgotten him, Mr. Mac Liammoir conveys the despair and confusion of a hero surrounded with triflers and tipplers.

THE OLD LADY SAYS 'NO!'

"THE OLD LADY SAYS 'NO!'" at the Mansfield Theatre, A Dublin Gate Theatre Production presented by Michael Mac Liammoir in association with Brian Roberts. Play by Denis Johnston. Directed by Hilton Edwards. Settings by Michael Mac Liammoir and Molly MacLennan. Costumes by Eileen Lammont.

CAST:

The Spectator (Robert Emmet) M. MacLiammoir
Sarah Curran.....Meriel Moore
Major Sir.....Reginald Furness
1st Redoubt.....Ryan Herbert
2nd Redoubt.....Liam Clancy
Bar Trevis, Edward Golden, David Brennan,
Ferdinand Nelson, William Edmund, Sam O'Leary, Robert Martin, Billy Rogers, Patrick Kennedy, Edna O'Rourke.

SYNOPSIS: The action of this play takes place on the stage of a Dublin theatre; the time is the present. The opening scene represents the garden of "The Priory," the home of John Philson Curran, close to Rathfarnham, Dublin, on the night of 19th August, 1911. The rest of the play takes place in the mind of The Spectator.

Neither the authors nor the actors have forgotten the meaning of the verb "to play." They create ideas and emotions without repeating them by rote. "The Old Lady Says 'No!'" is loose and sprawling, and seems to say the same thing more than once. But Mr. Johnston is a poet, which among other things means rebellious; and his play is a refreshing experiment in true theatre.

Journal of the American

February 18, 1948

A Slow-Moving Play Deep in Confusion

By ROBERT GARLAND

Turning from "John Bull's Other Island" to "The Old Lady Says 'No!'" those Other Islanders at the Mansfield might well have heeded the Old Lady's negative before setting out from their Gate Theatre in Dublin. To my way of thinking, she said a mouthful.

For where Bernard Shaw's unromantic comedy without choral interludes is diffuse and meaningful, Denis Johnston's romantic fantasy with choral interludes is diffuse and meaningless. You've got to be Irishier than I to make head or tail of the vagaries.

Programs admit that "The Old Lady Says 'No!'" needs

quite some explanation to a non-Irishman. Believe you them, the Denis Johnston romantic fantasy with choral interludes sees Dublin life through the refracted vision of a dizzy actor made up as Robert Emmet.

To the dizzy actor, if not to the dizzy audience, the Old Lady who says "No!" becomes "a caustic vision of modern Ireland, a degraded Cathleen Ní Houlihan, confused in the mind of Robert Emmet with Sarah Curran, Beatrice and her image-haunted Dante"....

Well, this gives you some idea! Or does it?

Of the Mind

Again quoting programs, the

action of "The Old Lady Says 'No!'" takes place backstage at a Dublin theatre. The opening scene is the garden of Robert Emmet's sweetheart. What follows is in the knocked-out actor's mind.

This ailing actor, rightly struck down while impersonating Robert Emmet in unusually blank blank verse, goes from verse to worse as the dream-play proceeds. It's a bad dream and a bad play, and "The Old Lady Says 'No!'" gets nowhere slowly.

Getting nowhere, it hems and halts at quaint and questionable places with shadows dancing on the walls, Dubliners forgathered in honor of the arts, Cathleen Ní Houlihan begging in the streets and a ghostly little girl reciting Mr. Milne.

Having dragged "The King's Breakfast" onto the stage, I'm surprised that Denis Johnston fails to fetch Winnie-the-Pooh as well. Perhaps he does, for there're all sorts of oddities at the Mansfield and you never can tell what's what, or who's....

Or about the choral interludes on the sound machines!

Plays Ailing Actor

Micheal MacLiammoir, co-

founder of the Gate Theatre, the Larry Doyle of last week's Shavian talkfest, actor, designer, painter, playwright, linguist, autobiographer, director and hand-across-the-sea-er, is seen and heard as the ailing actor.

To look at in the costumes of Robert Emmet, Mr. MacLiammoir is merely one more imported mummer. To listen to, while in a coma on a Dublin showshop's floor, he's an evening's joy. No more entrancing speaking voice is raised on Broadway.

For a fleeting early love scene, Meriel Moore pretends to be Sarah Curran, Robert Emmet's sweetheart, looking down from her father's house on an August evening in 1893. From then on, the Other Ones take over and frenetic fantasy ensues.

Those quoteful programs suggest that, to an Irish audience, "The Old Lady Says 'No!'" is a high example of the modern Irish play. Frankly, I've got my doubts about it! And so has Lady Gregory, the Old Lady who said "No!" to the present presentation....

To Lady Gregory's "No!", my negative is herewith added!



"The Old Lady Says 'No!'"—continued

NEW YORK
Herald Tribune

February 18, 1948

— By HOWARD BARNES —

Irish Fantasy

THE visiting Dublin Gate Theater has had the sense to admit that Denis Johnston's "The Old Lady Says 'No!'" calls for some explanation to a non-Irish audience. This second offering in a festival of Irish comedies at the Mansfield Theater is the freest sort of fantasy. At times it has rare poetic imagination as it looks "on Dublin life through the refracted vision of a stunned actor." There are wonderfully satirical thrusts at the intelligentsia of a couple of decades

ago, elliptical tributes to Joyce, Shaw, O'Casey, Yeats and Wilde and a recurrent leit motif of insurrection. It is a strange and disorderly play, which manages to get even Dante and Beatrice into a tale of the gallant revolutionary. Robert Emmet and his doomed romance with Sarah Curran.

When a dramatist goes as expressionistic as Johnston does in "The Old Lady Says 'No!'" the appeal of his work resides almost wholly in the power of his fancy. In this instance it wavers badly, but it has a certain cumulative excitement. The author admits that he has followed the principles of musical composition rather than conventional dramatic rules.

His consideration of an actor playing Emmet, who gets conked in the opening scene of a romantic

piece about the 1803 uprising and then goes through a period of delirium, has violent dissonances as well as evocative melodies. There is more latent talent than theatrical achievement in the production.

It would require a far more extended glossary than is to be found in the Mansfield program to give much notion of Johnston's script. It is best summed up in the explanation that the actor's delirium finds the Old Lady (the personification of Ireland known as Cathleen ni Houlihan), a caustic vision of modern Dublin and that man will be broken in his search for Paradise unless he is prepared to create it for himself. Such figures as Henry Grattan have little meaning for an American layman and an allusion to Parnell is somewhat baffling, while the shooting of a character known as Joe is too sym-

bolic for vigorous communication.

The mounting of the play is far more imaginatively arresting than the subject matter. Hilton Edwards has directed and lighted the offering with brilliant effect, from the yammering scene of a Dublin soiree to shadow images in a glen. Molly MacEwan has again painted simple and fetching backdrops for the action and Michael MacLiammoir has designed appropriate costumes. As The Speaker, who was playing Emmet when slugged and envisions the nightmare of the drama, MacLiammoir is splendid. He amply deserves his advance notices. Meriel Moore gives him great aid as Sara and Cathleen ni Houlihan, while Reginald Jarman and the others in the company play with enthusiasm and skill. "The Old Lady Says 'No!'" is murky, but it has considerable stage fascination.

New York Post

February 18, 1948

The Dublin Gate Offers An Engaging Novelty

By RICHARD WATTS JR.

The visiting Irish from the Dublin Gate Theatre offered an absorbing dramatic conundrum by Denis Johnston last night as the second presentation of their local season. It is called, for little visible reason, "The Old Lady Says 'No!'" and even those of us who think we know something about Ireland and its drama will have great difficulty telling you just what it is about. I confess I understand it but sketchily, but I found it steadily fascinating. Well acted, imaginatively directed and written with striking virtuosity, it proves to be a novel and entertaining

theatrical adventure.

Mr. Johnston, who should be remembered as author of "The Moon in the Yellow River," one of the distinguished plays of the Irish theatre, has, on the surface, written about an actor who is hit on the head and knocked unconscious while playing the role of Robert Emmet, the Irish patriot, in a melodrama. In his delirium he believes he actually is Emmet and the play describes how in his restless dreams he wanders through modern Dublin

Dublin of Shadows

Essentially the drama is concerned with showing the Irish in one of their most characteristic moods, that of self-castigation. As the greatpoint Emmet battles his way through his delirium in a Dublin of grotesque shadows, it is contemporary Eire, its people and its culture, which he encounters, and it is

the author's idea to throw into sardonic contrast romantic, legendary Ireland and the present-day actuality. Mr. Johnston's contention is that the comparison is far from comforting, with cheapness and vulgarity/unhappily rampant.

Despite its fantastic expressionist form, much of "The Old Lady" is not difficult to follow. No playgoer with any imagination should have trouble with the shifting identity of various characters. That Major Sirr, who captured Emmet, and the patriot Grattan, whose reforms were constitutional, should be the same enemy in the mind of the revolutionary; that Sarah should shift from a poetic symbol of Ireland to a hideous old crone in the vision of a degraded modern world, and that the romantic Emmet of history should today be only an actor impersonating a romantic figure—all these details have complete dramatic logic.

The Enigma

The enigmatic aspects of the

play appear in many parochial and fairly obscure references to Irish life, culture and politics, as well as in various personal thrusts Mr. Johnston takes at rival literary figures and in the frequent use of quotations from other writers. But even when puzzling it is entertaining, in great part because so much of it is genuinely funny. There are a number of scenes, particularly at a party and in a pub, that are richly comic. And all of it is remarkably alive.

I thought the Gate players managed everything admirably. Hilton Edwards' direction is resourceful and, in the leading role, Micheal MacLiammoir is eloquent and impressive. There are a great number of lesser parts and all of them are effectively played. No doubt a lot of people will be driven to spluttering rage by the frankishness and obscurity of a play that revels in being perverse. But if you take it for the fun, imagination and beauty that are in it, I think you might find "The Old Lady" a refreshing novelty.

"Ghosts"

NEW YORK
Herald Tribune

February 17, 1948

— By HOWARD BARNES —

LeGallienne's 'Ghosts'

HENRIK IBSEN's gloomy tragedy, "Ghosts," has been brought to fitful stage life at the Cort. The new revival finds Eva Le Gallienne acting as adapter and star, under the auspices of Louis J. Singer and the American Repertory Theater. She is better as actress than translator. Under Margaret Webster's somber direc-

tion, she keeps the drama building through its turbid contemplation of hereditary disease, contemplated incest and a mercy murder. Unfortunately she has found no new dramatic facets in a play which could not have been composed after the discovery of penicillin.

The work has always had a fascination for leading ladies of the theater. Alla Nazimova appeared in it something over a decade ago in the William Archer version. It has far less impact now. Although Miss Le Gallienne gives a supremely poised and somewhat harrowing portrayal of the unfortunate mother who witnesses the sins of a father visited on a second

generation, the piece is as dated as the kerosene lamps which light the Watson Barratt setting. Even the structural unity of the drama falls apart in an accelerated climax. Where it should have been moving, "Ghosts" is merely baleful.

The Le Gallienne Mrs. Alving is the chief reason for witnessing a re-creation of the Norwegian dramatist's discussion of inherited venereal disease and venality in general. The star acts with tremendous authority, whether she is disclosing infamous secrets to a minister and her unwanted stepdaughter, or preparing to release her rotting son from a terrible affliction. There is one point in

'GHOSTS'

Play by Henrik Ibsen; translated by Eva Le Gallienne; staged by Margaret Webster; setting by Watson Barratt; presented by Louis J. Singer and the American Repertory Theater at the Cort Theater, Monday evening, February 16, 1948. The cast: Regina Engstrand—Jean Hagen; Jacob Engstrand—Robert Emhardt; Reverend Mr. Manders—Herbert Berghof; Mrs. Helene Alving—Eva Le Gallienne; Oswald Alving—Alfred Ryder.

SYNOPSIS: The action takes place at Mrs. Alving's country house, beside one of the large fjords in western Norway. The time is toward the end of the nineteenth century. Act I—Late afternoon. Act II—After dinner: same evening. Act III—Dawn: the next morning.

which she cries unashamedly on the stage. There can be no question that her tears are real.

Alfred Ryder gives her ample

"Ghosts"—continued

support as the boy who returns home to die. The translation does not always give him a break, but he makes the most of the horrible threnody which has kept "Ghosts"

on the boards for half a century. Jean Hagen creates a mood of lusty contrast in her characterization of the maid-servant in the Alving-household; Robert Emhardt

is properly self-seeking as her supposed father and Herbert Berghof goes all out in the role of the minister. "Ghosts" is something of a theatrical curio. At the Cort it is

a show for the avidly curious. One hopes that Miss Le Gallienne will have better luck with "Hedda Gabler," which supplants the present production in a fortnight.

Journal of the American

February 17, 1948

An Outmoded Play That's Rarely Alive

By ROBERT GARLAND

If the high-minded Eva Le Gallienne has a middle-name, it's "tenacity." Brought up theatrically in the anti-Sardoodium tradition, she's determined to give you Ibsen and make you like it.

In what's left of the American Repertory Theatre, aided rather than abetted by Louis Singer, she's reviving "Ghosts."

Almost half-a-century back, when Ida Jeffreys Goodfriend was the first Mrs. Helena Alving on the New York stage, the now orthodox iconoclasm of Miss Le Gallienne's revival—it follows "A Doll's House" and precedes "An Enemy of the People" in the Ibsen chronology—were, no doubt, piquant and revolutionary.

But times change. And, with them, what's piquant and revolutionary. Admitting that, dead or alive, the author of "Ghosts"

is an important and lasting influence in the modern theatre, the sociological problems of his non-poetic plays are as outmoded as the dramas of which they are the outstanding feature.

In our see-all, know-all, tell-all Alfred C. Kinsey age, the Ibsen "problem plays" are either museum pieces or pages from a student's history of the drama. As such, they're not without their interest and necessity.

From Another World

But, as reproduced in present-day Manhattan, across the street from "Harvey," "Ghosts" is like something from another theatre world. Which, to tell the truth, it is! And the fresh "translation" credited to Eva Le Gallienne and the stale direction discredited to Margaret Webster, help not at all.

Too infrequently does the semi-classic problem play come humanly alive. Too frequently does the work itself become a fictional effluvia, along with the Alving "ghosts" with which it's anachronistically concerned. In her acknowledged adaptation, which stems from William Archer, Miss Le Gallienne—

What I mean to say is that, at the Cort, the problem play to which we oldtimers are accustomed is pushed around without being improved by the pushing. The lines are unfamiliarly familiar! And the abortive attempts to modernize the dialogue fall disturbingly on old and well-acquainted ears...

It's as if the tragic and, nowadays, uncalled-for, tribulations of Helena Alving, her Oswald and his Regina, were being dramatized at second-hand. Jacob Engstrand and Parson Manders are penciled in for fun.

Oh, No, No, No

Beginning with Herbert Berghof's all-over acting, his Reverend Mr. Manders of this new "translation," his Parson Manders of the old, must be seen to be depreciated. On the faculty of the Neighborhood Playhouse, he well could serve as the perfect example of what an actor shouldn't do.

As Jacob Engstrand, Robert

Emhardt isn't much better. But there's less of him and I'm sure he's trying intentionally to be funny. Jean Hagen's a tasty Regina, although I shouldn't wonder if Oswald's only acting-up to make the going harder in the handsome home of his unhappy mother.

Against that impressive Norwegian background designed by Watson Barratt, Alfred Ryder, as Oswald, and Eva Le Gallienne, as Mrs. Alving, achieve an occasional Ibsenian sincerity when, as the distracted mother of a distressing son, they're onstage apart from their misguided fellow players...

Being middle-named "tenacity," Eva Le Gallienne soon turns from Ibsen's "Ghosts" to Ibsen's "Doll's House." Norma Heimer's already known to her. And I can hardly wait for Herbert Berghof's Thorwald!

February 18, 1948

In this space yesterday I erroneously reported that Eva Le Gallienne, starring in Ibsen's "Ghosts" at the Cort, would follow with a revival of "A Doll's House." Instead, the second Ibsen play to be performed by Miss Le Gallienne is "Hedda Gabler," in which she will portray the pistol packing mama of the title. ... I'm sorry!



February 18, 1947

Kronenberger

A Great Landmark Is Weakly Revived

Time, in taking from *Ghosts* much of its original purpose, has taken, too, something of its original power. Nor did the play ever, perhaps, represent Ibsen at his artistic best. Yet anybody with a spark of historical imagination must see that no mightier hammer-blow was struck in all of 19th-century drama; and that few fiercer blasts against an existing social morality have been

found anywhere in literature. Certainly in some ways the play is terrific still. As the masterly first act begins unfolding; as Mrs. Alving, having been brutally rebuked by Pastor Manders, turns round and brutally rebuts him, we feel that a whole era, so to speak, has shifted its weight. And while Ibsen with one hand turns a highly respectable dwelling into an all-glass house, with the other hand he is already busy throwing stones. And what stones, thrown at what statues! Half the moral statuary of the age ends by being toppled from its pedestals. The role of woman, the rights of a wife, the responsibilities of a moral

adviser; the dangers of concealment, the concept of duty, the bugbear of respectability—all these loom as large in *Ghosts* as the more vivid of sins of the fathers or mercy-killing of the children.

If they all do not loom as large in our age as they did in Ibsen's, dramatically at least (thanks to Ibsen's own sense of drama) there is still life in them. In the right hands, as Nazimova proved a dozen years ago, *Ghosts* is still powerful. In the wrong hands, as the current production makes all too plain, *Ghosts* grows pretty ponderous, exhibiting its period weaknesses much more than its permanent strength. At the Cort Monday night, the battle *Ghosts* was waging seemed over long ago; whereas we could have been made to feel that that kind of battle is never over. For Pastor Manders, at any rate, is an eternal type, an eternal menace: the discreet cough and deprecating voice of respectability-at-any-cost; the homage, one might almost say, that virtue renders to vice. It is unfortunate that Ibsen over-did Manders; but that's as nothing compared with how Herbert Berghof overdoes Ibsen. His Manders plays up

everything it should try to play down, and almost belongs in one of those bad Victorian melodramas that are revived for laughs.

And if Mr. Berghof's Manders is much too much, Miss Le Gallienne's Mrs. Alving is somewhat too little. It is well enough spoken at times, but never sharply or movingly enough acted: it has rather a deadening effect on a play that must somehow acquire new life. Jean Hagen's Regina seems oversimplified; Robert Emhardt's Engstrand, effective only on character-part terms. As Oswald, Alfred Ryder has the toughest assignment in the play: he is far from notable in it, but he makes it the most satisfactory performance of the evening. His Oswald, for one thing, avoids a touch of the metallic that gets into most of the other roles, and that I think must be charged against Miss Webster's direction.

—LOUIS KRONENBERGER



The New York Times

February 17, 1948

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Let's consider that Eva Le Gallienne has done her duty by Ibsen's drama about duty. She plays the leading character in "Ghosts" as intelligently as Ibsen wrote the part. With the assistance of Margaret Webster, who directed the performance, she has mounted the play respectfully at the Cort, where it opened last evening. But nearly seventy years have slipped away since "Ghosts" shocked and outraged respectable people in Europe, although the British were not shocked and enraged until a little later. For critical judgments

worse than those you are getting today, see the collection of noisome abuse William Archer put together and Shaw included in "The Quintessence of Ibsenism."

Since "Ghosts" is planned and written by a master craftsman of the old school, it can still be made exciting by great acting or by a novel point of view. Nazimova gave it size and the aura of malevolence in her revival in 1935. Long ago Mrs. Fluke, overburdened with mischief, made a comedy out of it, which was obviously incorrect, though rather ingratiating.

Miss Le Gallienne is an honest actress with a lucid style. She knows Ibsen as thoroughly as she knows Chekhov, and the Mrs. Alving she plays is no doubt Ibsen's character. But his ponderous assault upon duty seems more like history now than a criticism of life. With the help of Shaw a couple of decades later Ibsen won that revolution. No one has ever done anything from a sense of duty

since Ibsen and Shaw destroyed middle-class culture.

As the chief prioress of intelligence in our theatre, Miss Le Gallienne gives us a liberated Mrs. Alving, who is no longer humbugged by polite superstition. Working in a small compass, as becomes her, she makes a carefully wrought design out of the character. A nod, a gleam, a fleeting gesture, a hurried step or two, a limp manner of sitting on the divan while the parson roars virtuous bombast—she designs a full-length character out of these and other bits of eloquence. She also speaks uncommonly well. But for a play that needs so much drive and strength to compensate for hardened arteries, Miss Le Gallienne's performance is weak. She leaves it well inside the grounds of the old folks' home.

And isn't the pace unnecessarily torpid? Everything else about the performance seems excellent. Alfred Ryder does a particularly good

job with young Oswald, describing the whole progress of the character from filial affability through mounting terror to madness. As the pious stuffed shirt, Herbert Berghof gives a forceful performance that catches the sanctimonious stupidity of the part. Jean Hagen's scheming servant-girl is well played also—the commonness harshly breaking out of the demure reserve in the last scene. And Robert Emhardt's obsequious knavery is amusing.

In designing and lighting the setting Watson Barratt has achieved complete illusion without crowding the stage with manufacturing and construction. His nineteenth-century drawing-room, stuffy without being dull, is one of his best pieces of work. There is a lot of good work in this revival of "Ghosts." But it does not conjure the dullness out of the script. Respectability can be as pernicious as duty. After a violent birth in 1881, "Ghosts" is respectable now.

Daily Mirror

February 17, 1948

Repertory 'Ghosts' Only a Wraith

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Louis J. Singer and the American Repertory Company brought an unbelievably dull production of Henrik Ibsen's "Ghosts" to the Cort Theatre last night. It had some of us first nighters searching for pillows on which to rest our aching heads. We'd even have settled for one with a crooner's kisser embossed on it.

There's no doubt about it, "Ghosts" is showing its years. It's as whiskery and dated as old Father Time waiting to turn over the new year to a spry, hopeful young successor. What shocked our fathers and grandfathers around 1900 now seems stuffy and, on occasions, downright puerile.

When Mrs. Alving turned on Pastor Manders and called his preaching "mechanical and dead," there were some of us out front who thought her observation applicable to "Ghosts."

And Pastor Manders had his innings, too, winning some of the

few laughs ever wrung out of Ibsen. Returning from the fire which had destroyed the Alving orphanage, he moaned: "It's been a ghastly night." The suffering customers howled appreciatively.

Margaret Webster had directed some of our finest Shakespeare productions, but she appears to be out of her element when confronted with Ibsen. Her staging of "Ghosts" is slow, pointless and ineffectual. It drowns out what merits the venerable script still has.

Eve Le Gallienne's Mrs. Alving is more physical than spiritual. She waves her arms like the wings of a windmill in a stiff blow and beats the dust out of the furniture with her hands. She must have been as tired when it was all over as were the squirming unfortunates in the auditorium.

Herbert Berghof is overwhelmed by the obtuse Pastor Manders, but succumbs only after a vigorous display of caustic thetics. His pushing out of

palms was reminiscent of those physical culture systems in which exercise is gained by the imaginary opposition of muscles.

Alfred Ryder struggles valiantly to make a human being of Oswald, but doesn't receive much help from the rest of the cast. He managed a couple of effective moments and then took the easy way out of a bad spot. Robert Emhardt and Jean Hagen flunk their tests as the noisome Engstrand and the callous Regina.

Watson Barratt has designed, probably on order, a drab, gray setting, as funeral as the drama which it encases.

The Misses Le Gallienne and Webster have given us many admirable productions. For them we have been duly grateful. But they have come a cropper with "Ghosts," which one lobby wag described as the ghost of the American Repertory Theatre. For this antidote for insomnia we cannot summon an ounce of gratitude.

DAILY NEWS

February 17, 1948

Eva Le Gallienne Revives Ibsen's 'Ghosts,' and It Looks a Bit Pallid

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Ibsen's "Ghosts" being a milestone—a milestone with a low number—in the progress of the modern drama, and being a tragedy whose fundamental power time cannot diminish, any reasonably competent performance of the play cannot be without value.

The dauntless Eva Le Gallienne, still carrying the banner of the American Repertory Theatre, has brought "Ghosts" to the Cort Theatre for a fortnight's run. It is, I would say, reasonably com-

petent in performance, and therefore one should be grateful, for a dozen years have passed since the last production of a great play.

But it is by no means a great performance. Miss Le Gallienne's translation of the work, which was made a good many years ago,

seems now to be dated—and it is odd to be calling "dated" any subsequent translation of a work which first appeared in 1881. But that's the way I felt about it last evening—felt that many of the repetitions of the "You mean—?" "Yes, I mean . . ." variety were obscuring the dramatist's work, instead of making it clear and forceful.

Minor Roles Better Done. Nor was I too happy with Mar-

garet Webster's direction, which permits some of the players—notably Herbert Berghof and Miss Le Gallienne—too much leisure and impedes the fateful march of the tragedy to its classic Greek conclusion.

Mr. Berghof plays Pastor Manders some of the time like a Dutch comic, losing a good bit of Ibsen's scornfully ironic exposure of a clergyman who hides from truth. Miss Le Gallienne often is merely rueful as the widow Alving, even though there comes crashing about her in ruins an entire world.

Most successful of the company is, in my mind, Robert Emhardt as the cringing and crafty carpenter, Engstrand. Jean Hagen is attractive and quite spirited as Regina, and Mrs. Alving's son is played with decent restraint by Alfred Ryder.

The genius of Ibsen still haunts "Ghosts," but it is only a mildly substantial wraith in the present production.